Overview of Trauma

Block 11

Sexual Assault Response Coordinator Training

The Field Glass (Magritte)

The Menil Collection, Houston

Psychological Trauma

- Trauma is an event that produces overwhelming feelings of fear, horror or helplessness
- Traumatic events overwhelm our capacity to cope without paying a price

Where Trauma Effects Us

- Trauma effects us at every level of the self
- The “self” includes
  - How we think
  - What we believe
  - How we feel
  - Habitual ways of managing our feelings
  - How we connect to other people
  - What it feels like to be in our body

How Trauma Hurts Us

- Trauma injures us by
  - Flooding us with overwhelming emotions
  - Shattering our illusions of control
  - Altering our sustaining beliefs
  - Straining the ties that connect us to others
  - Changing our biology
    - (via arousal, indelible memories)
  - Requiring costly coping strategies

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I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made.

Housman, 1900
(Quoted in Shengold, 1989 p. 315)

The Central Question

How can an experience that has ended and which resides in the past, so transform the self that the very landscape of reality seems changed?

The Past is never dead.

It is not even past.

William Faulkner

In Unresolved *Trauma*

- The past remains present in the brain
  - as vividly as the day it was experienced
- From deep within the brain, this memory of the past shapes our experience of the present

Trauma Effects the Self

- Our emotions (what we feel, and how we manage what we feel)
- Our thoughts (what we think, believe and how we make sense of our experiences)
- Our biology (how our body feels, reacts and processes experience)

Our Emotions

- Motivates, activates and directs our behavior
- Helps us rapidly assess and interpret situations
- Directs our attention to important information
- Helps us remember (via emotional associations)
- Guides our thinking about relationships and important decisions
- Gives life its texture and sense of meaning

Trauma Disrupts the Emotional System

- Traumatic emotions are uncontained and overwhelming – they flood us
- Emotional flooding breaks down normal ways of regulating our feelings
- Emotional flooding can feel like dying
  - Erases the sense of “me”

I only let myself feel it once. The feelings caught me totally by surprise. I guess I had let down my guard and suddenly this wave of grief hit and I felt like I was melting, dying, worse -- vanishing. It was like everything I knew to be me no longer mattered. It was like being dead only worse because I was disappearing and all that was left was pain and nothing else that I could recognize. There was no me.

Lebowitz, clinical notes, 2003

Responding To Overwhelming Emotions

- Dissociation
- Avoidance
- Numbness
- Self-harm
- Self-blame
- Self-medication/substance abuse

In the Aftermath of Trauma

- Unbearable feelings must be borne and over time, digested
- In the absence of effective coping, costly psychological defenses must be maintained
- Over time this may damage the emotional system

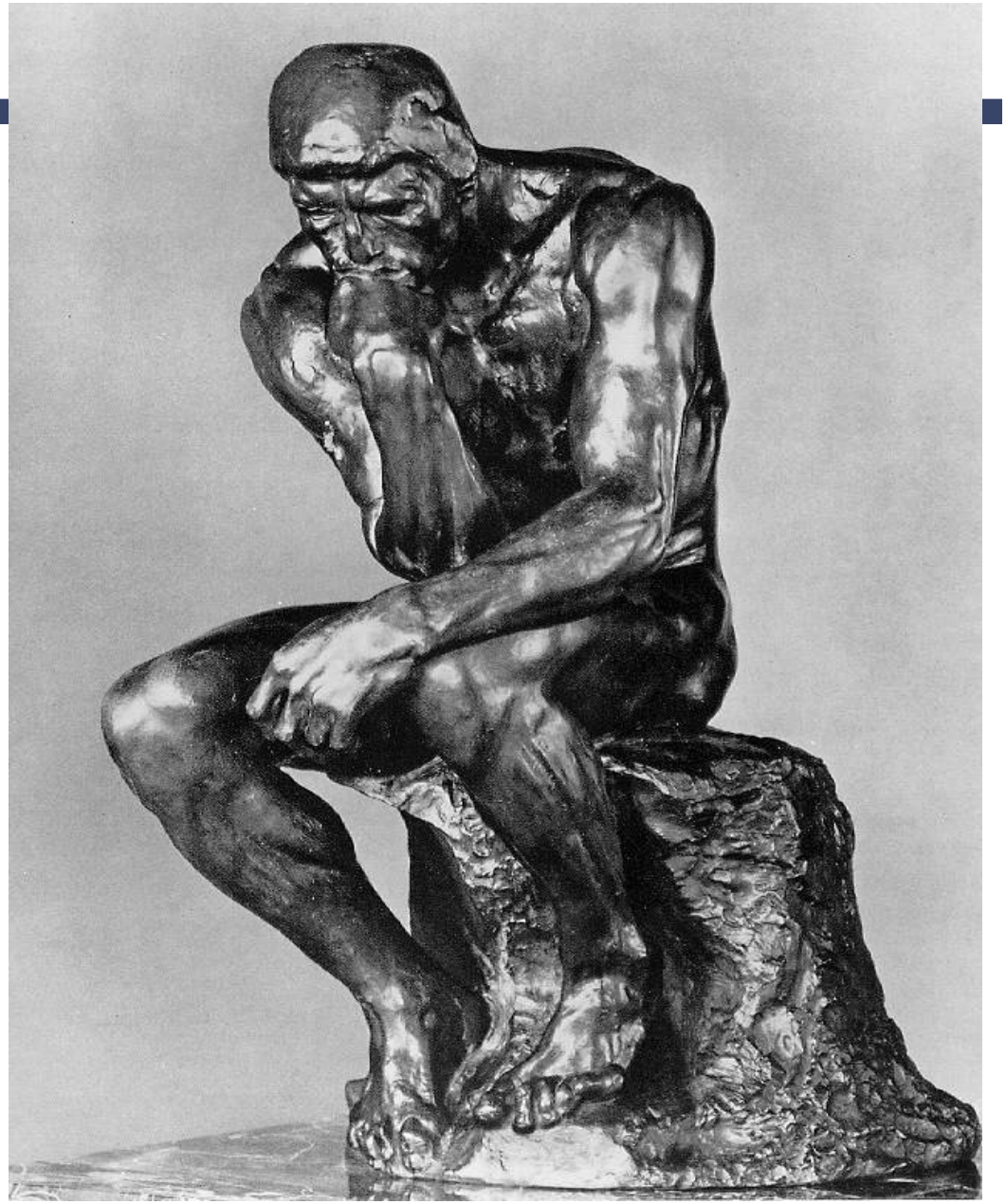
Emotional Disruption

- Emotions become threatening
- May be experienced as all or nothing
- Strong emotions may trigger numbness
- When emotions are chronically avoided, an inability to recognize or use one's emotions may develop

When everything seems like the movies,
You bleed just to know you're alive.

And I don't want the world to see me,
'Cause I don't think they'd understand.
When everything's made to be broken,
I just want you to know who I am.

Goo Goo Dolls – “Iris”



Living by Ideas

- Self Image
- Expectations of others
- Values
- Sustaining beliefs
- Mental maps
  - Knowledge
  - Anticipation and prediction
  - Interpretation
  - Understanding

Our Mind

- Your history and your ideas shape your experience
- Therefore, experience is, partially, a function of how you interpret what happens
- How you interpret what happens is, partially, a function of all that has already happened to you

Trauma Changes Our Ideas

- Trauma shatters positive ideas
- Trauma confirms negative ideas
- Trauma creates conflicts within the self

Trauma and Meaning

- Traumatic meanings:
  - Are terrible to know and to bear
  - Are hard to make sense of
  - Threaten sustaining and positive beliefs
  - Confirm feared, less positive ideas about self, world and other people
  - May activate conflicts between important beliefs

Approach and Avoidance

- Anything that inhibits either effective processing or taking a restorative break will interfere with resolving the trauma
  - Inability to feel safe, calm and get respite
  - Unbearable meanings
  - Overwhelmingly intense emotions
  - Grotesque and horrifying imagery
  - Self-blame
  - Lack of social support
  - Unconscious conflict
  - No opportunity to process what has happened

The Biological System

The burned hand teaches best.

After that, advice about fire

goes straight to the heart.

(Gandolf to Pippin, The Two Towers: The Lord of the Rings, J.R. Tolkien)

The Biological System

- Thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all biological events
- The brain is malleable and shaped by our life experiences
- Our experience of our life is, in turn, shaped by the brain and its prior life experiences

The Brain is Like a Muscle

- Learning changes the brain
- Trauma is a form of emotionally supercharged learning
- A trauma exposed brain perceives and interprets information differently than a non-trauma exposed brain

Threat and the Biological System

- Our brains are designed to encode, remember, and react automatically to threat

- Perceiving, remembering, and responding to life threat trumps all other needs

WHO DO YOU IDENTIFY WITH?

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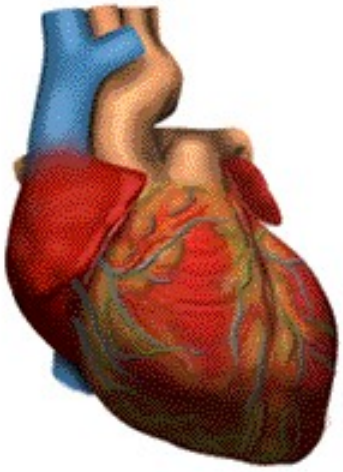

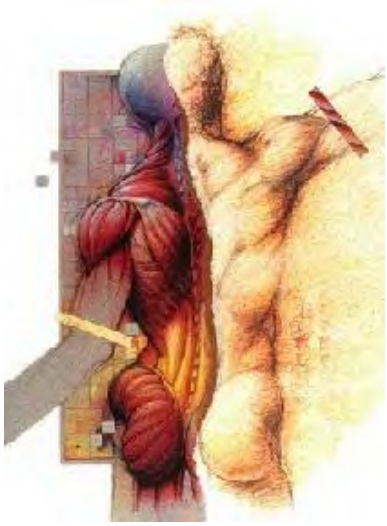

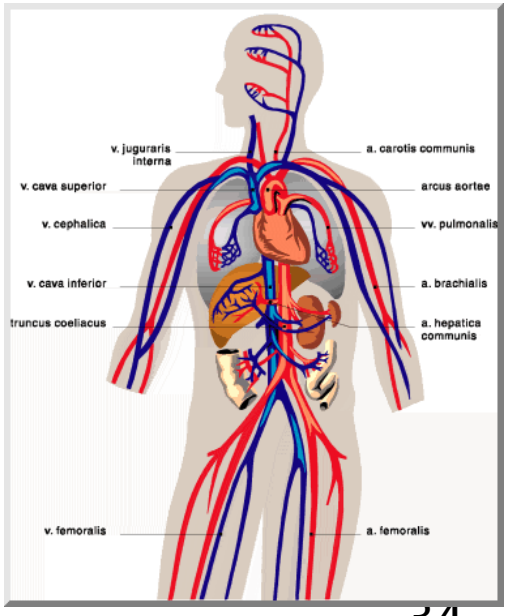

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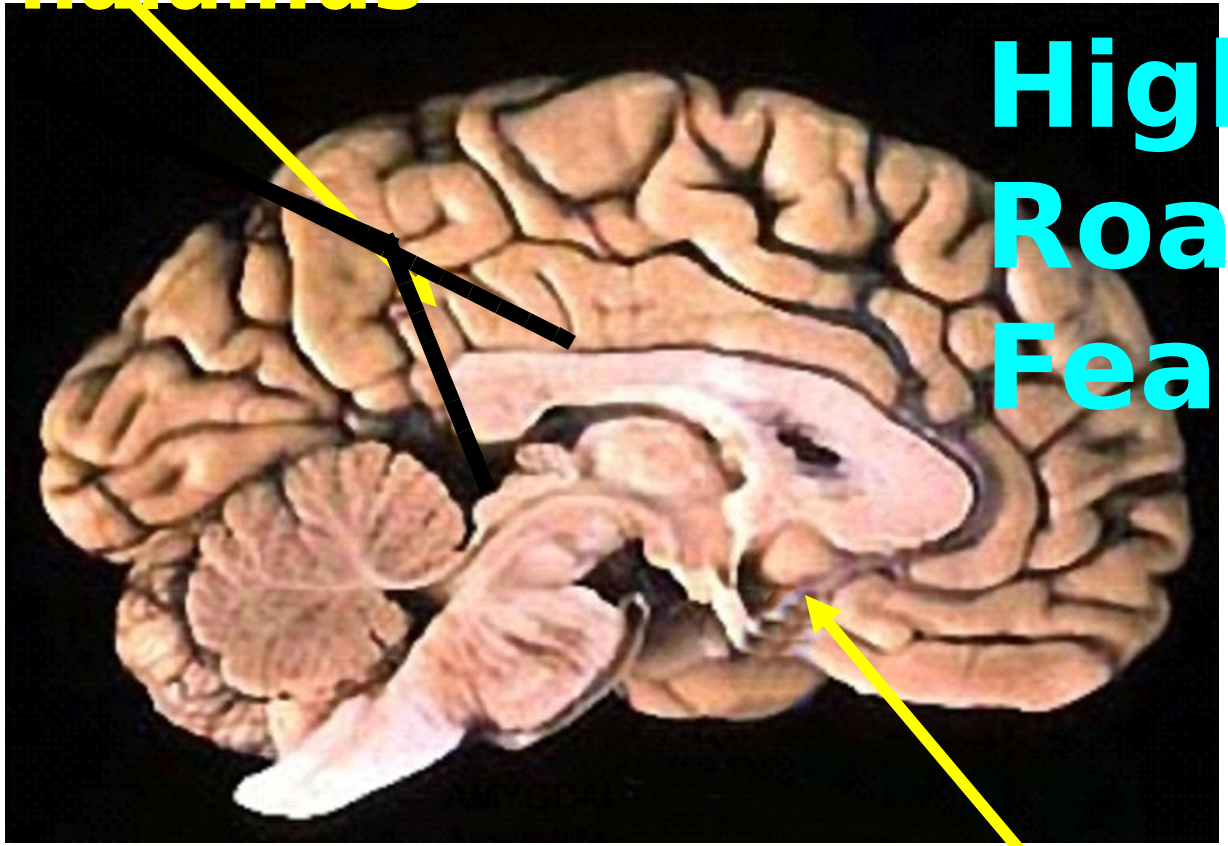
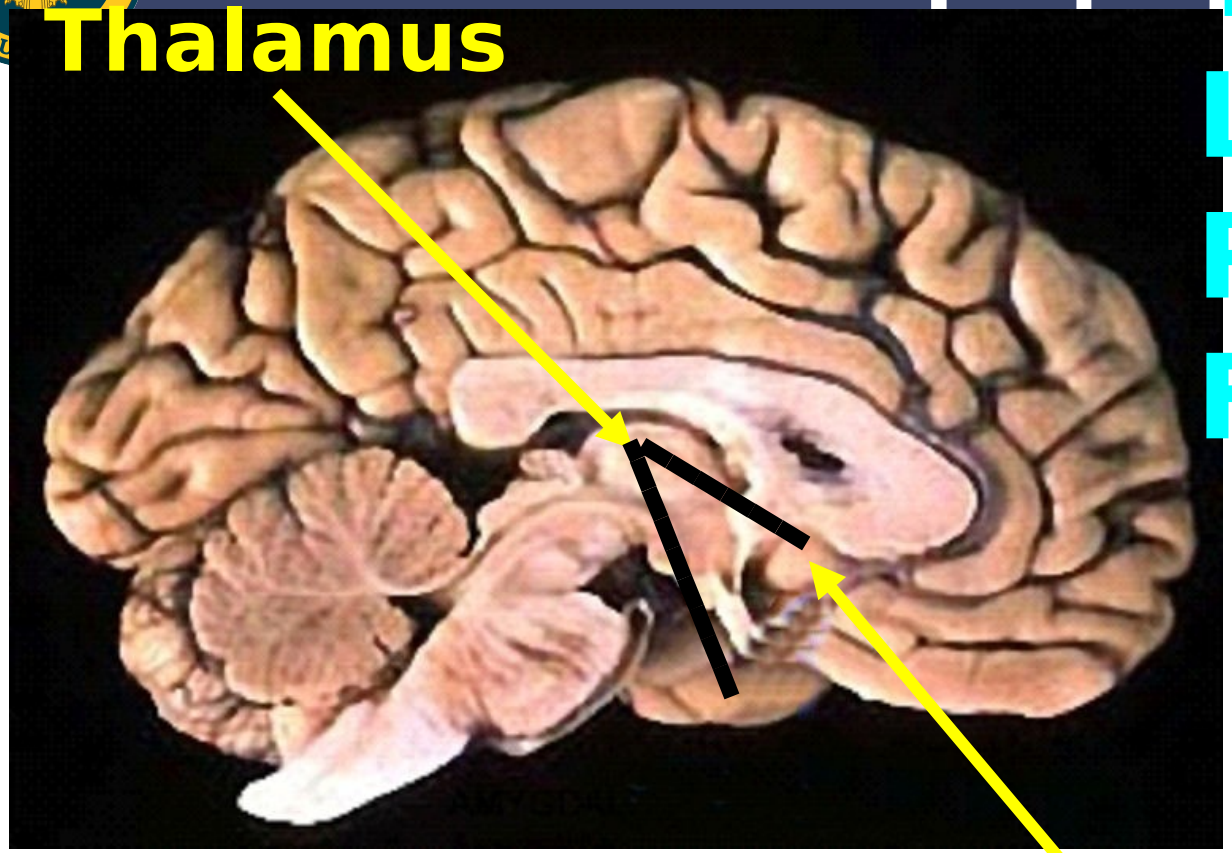
The High Road to Fear



The Low Road to Fear



The Fear Exposed Brain

- Intense fear changes the brain
- After intense fear the brain is pre-disposed to perceive and re-act automatically to fearful stimuli

Pre-trauma Processing of Ordinary Stimulus

Post-trauma Processing of Ordinary Stimulus

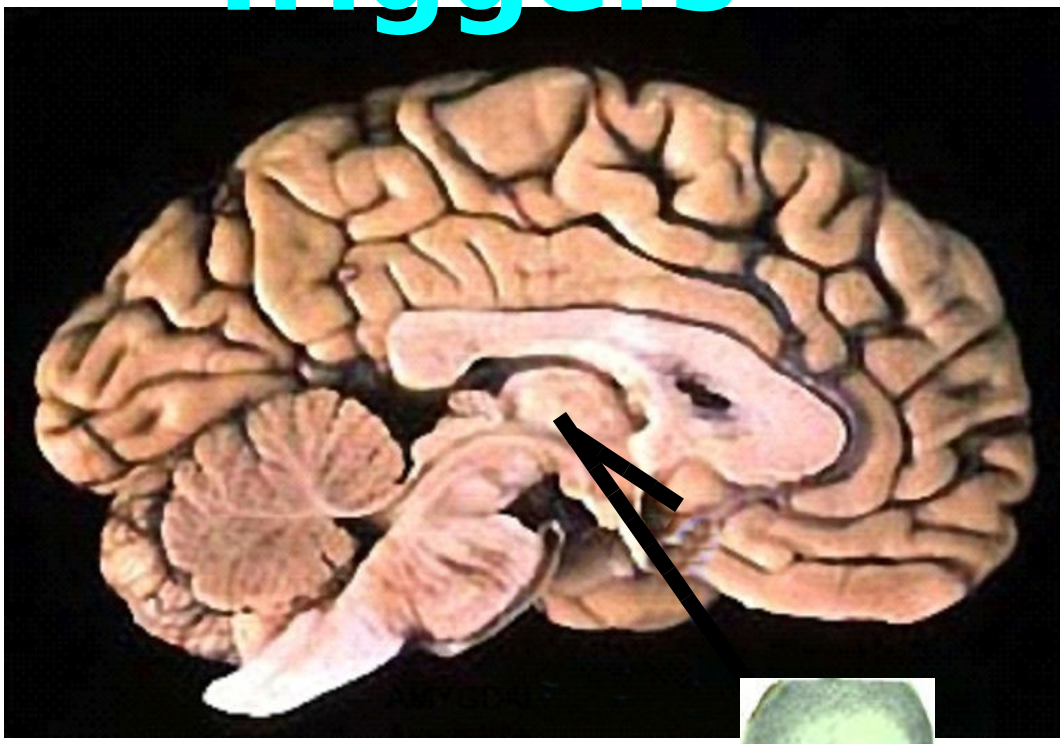
Threat!

!

Danger!

!

A Landscape of Triggers



After Trauma

- Physical responses, feelings and thoughts associated with the trauma may be automatically triggered
- Repeated triggering reinforces the links between cues and response
- This process can occur with, or without, awareness

Tunnel Vision
Loss of Peripheral Detail
Seared into Memory

The chemicals that permeate the brain during a trauma super-charge the brain's ability to encode new memories and simultaneously interfere with its ability to sequence and contextualize those memories

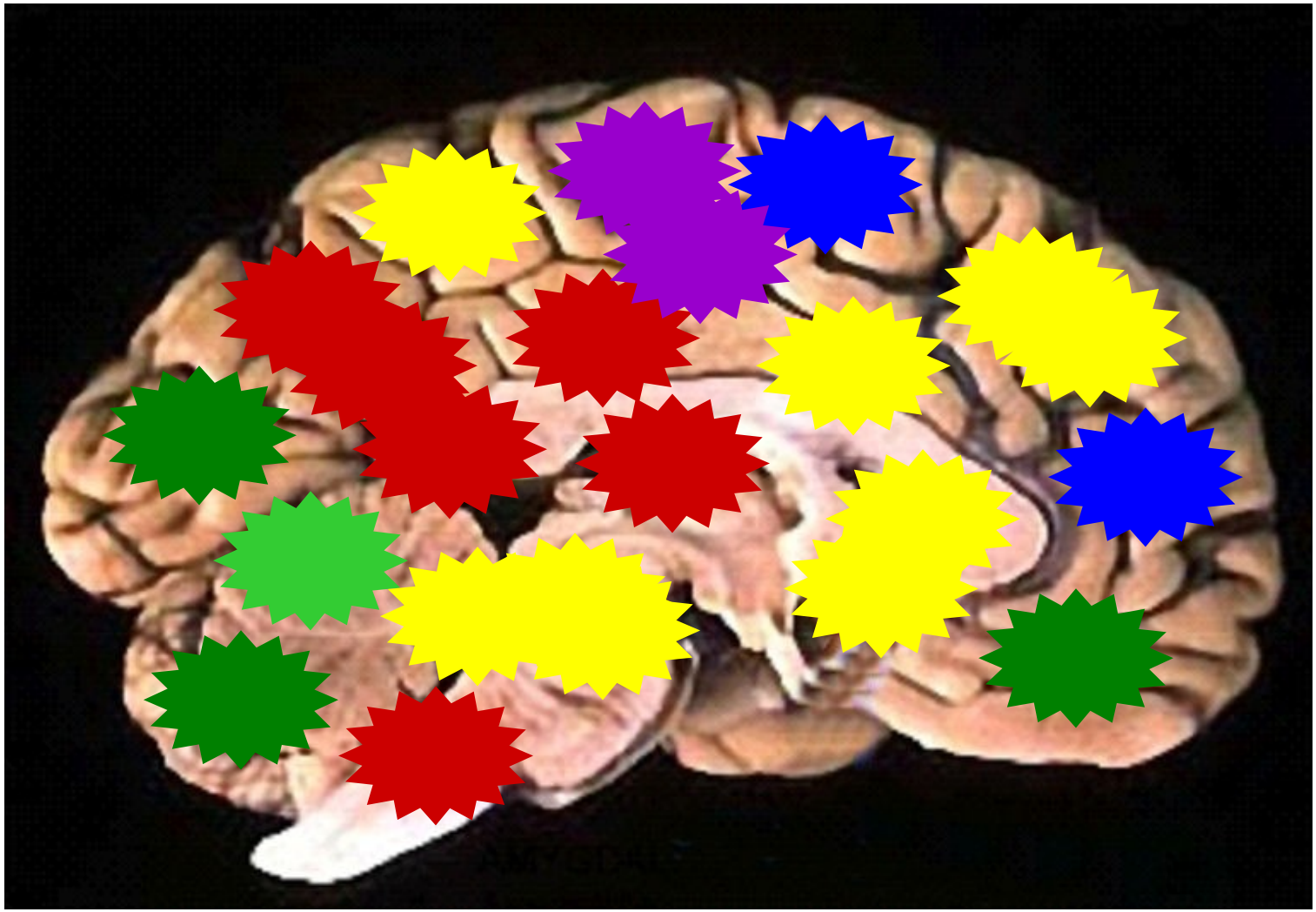
Normal versus Traumatic Memories

- Normal memories:
  - Sequential coherent story
  - Thoughts, feelings images are unified
  - Tend to change and fade with time

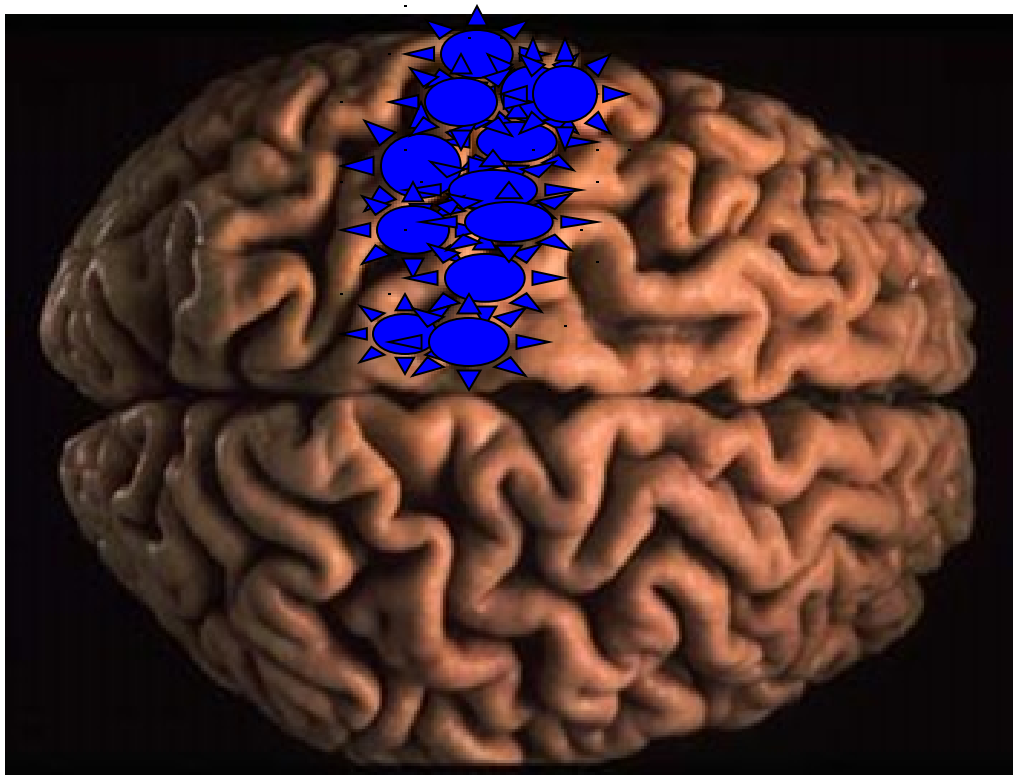
Normal versus Traumatic Memories

- Traumatic Memories
  - Encoded as disconnected fragments
  - Tend to be pure sensations, images and un-integrated thoughts
  - Etched into the brain, potentially indelible

Phenomenology of Traumatic Memory

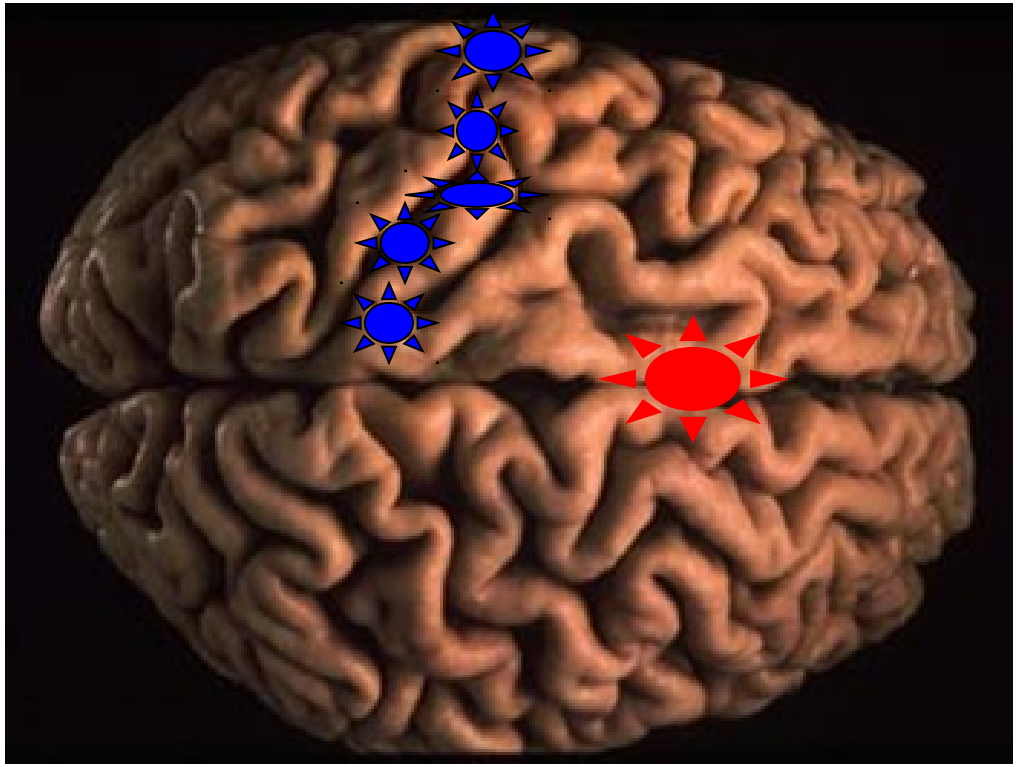


Trauma Victim: Non-trauma Script



"He opened the front door and smiled and I immediately recognized him as the man I had dated during my freshman year in college. I was thrilled to see him again and I couldn't believe it really..."

Trauma Victim: Trauma Script



"He put his arm across my windpipe and I couldn't breathe and I started to really panic but I couldn't scream because I just couldn't – I could smell him, this smell that I can't get

The Biology of Trauma

- What are the implications of this biology?
  - Indelible memories
  - Automatic reactivity
  - Fragmented recall
  - Controlling emotions
  - Organizing ideas

Trauma

- Floods us with intense, unbearable emotions
- Initiates a cascade of neurobiological processes that change the physiology of our body
- Shatters positive ideas and confirms negative ones
- Engenders psychological conflict
- Changes the usual, more positive ways we interpret our experience
- Leaves us feeling unfamiliar to ourselves, confused, bereft, self-doubting and emotionally volatile

ADDITIONAL SLIDES

Next afternoon a train conveyed me to the Base Hospital. My memories of that journey are rather strange and terrible, for it carried a cargo of men in whose minds the horrors they had escaped from were still vitalized and violent…every bandaged man was accompanied by his battle experience. Although many of them talked lightly and even facetiously about it, there was an aggregation of enormities in the atmosphere of that train….The front line was behind us; but it could lay its hand on our hearts, though its bludgeoning reality diminished with every mile. It was as if we were pursued by the Arras battle, which had now become a huge and horrible idea. We might be boastful or sagely reconstructive about our experience, in accordance with our different characters. But our minds were still out of breath and our inmost thoughts in disorderly retreat from the bellowing darkness….We were the survivors; few among us would ever tell the truth to our friends and relations in England. We were carrying in our heads which belonged to us alone, and to those we had left behind us in the battle.

Siegfried Sassoon, a WWI veteran
(Quoted in van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisbaeth 1996, p. 132

Sensory

The Fear Pathway